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ABSTRACT

Many totalitarian communist states throughout the world have broken up during the 1990's, and citizens in those countries, from Central and South American to Central and Eastern Europe, are working to build constitutional democracies out of the rubble. Part of creating these new governments is devising new school curricula to include civic education--which addresses civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic virtues--and to teach young citizens the theory and practice of constitutional democracy. The objectives of civic education are: (1) to teach basic ideas thoroughly so that students can discern between an authentic constitutional democracy and a bogus one; (2) to develop intellectual participatory skills so students can, as citizens, think and act on behalf of their rights and the common good; and (3) to nurture civic virtues such as self-discipline, civility, compassion, tolerance, and respect. Effective democratic teachers must develop lessons and activities for students that emphasize and combine these three elements of civic education in a classroom environment that promotes the theory and practice of constitutional democracy and liberty. The democratic teacher must challenge students to take responsibility for achieving educational objectives; foster academic freedom by encouraging and protecting free and open expression of ideas; establish and apply rules fairly; and create a respectful atmosphere. The digest includes a 17-item bibliography. (LP)

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Civic Education for Constitutional Democracy: An International Perspective

by John J. Patrick

The ideas of liberty, democracy, and constitutionalism have risen to global prominence in the 1990s, as major bastions of totalitarian communism have crumbled and collapsed. In various parts of the world, from Central and South America to Central and Eastern Europe, newly empowered citizens have tried to build democratic foundations for their nation-states. And in their daunting pursuit of the "blessings of liberty," they have understood that new curricula for their schools are as important as new constitutions for their governments. Among other educational goals, they have recognized that schools must teach young citizens the theory and practices of constitutional democracy if they would develop and sustain free societies and free governments.

Regardless of their differences in history, culture, and resources, all people interested in teaching constitutional democracy authentically and effectively must address general educational elements pertaining to civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic virtues. These basic categories of civic education may be treated variously by educators of different countries. But there are certain themes within each generic category that are international and transcultural. They are the criteria by which we define civic education for constitutional democracy. These defining characteristics or standards must NOT be avoided or violated by anyone who would teach authentically the knowledge, skills, and virtues of civic life in a constitutional democracy dedicated to liberty.

Essential Civic Knowledge. The first objective of civic education is to teach thoroughly the meaning of the most basic idea, so that students will know what a constitutional democracy is, and what it is not. If students would be prepared to act as citizens of a constitutional democracy they must know how to distinguish this type of government from other types. The label constitutional democracy, has often been used by regimes with showcase constitutions proclaiming popular governments and individual rights, which have meant little or nothing to the regimes' victims of tyranny. The so-called "people's democracies" of former communist countries are tragic twentieth-century examples of the bogus use of a political label.

Through their civic education in schools, students should develop defensible criteria by which to think critically and evaluate the extent to which their government and other governments of the world do or do not function authentically as constitutional democracies. A few key concepts necessary to a deep understanding of constitutional democracy must be taught and learned, such as the rule of law, limited government, representative government, individual rights, popular sovereignty, political participation, and civil society. Students must learn how these key concepts of democratic political theory are institutionalized and practiced in their own country in comparison to other nation-states of the world.

Finally, students must pursue inquiries about the transnational, generic, perennial problems of any constitutional democracy: how to combine liberty with order, majority rule with minority rights, and private rights with the public good. They must understand that a constitutional democracy will fail (1) if the government has too much power or too little power and (2) if the government overemphasizes majority rule at the expense of minority rights or vice-versa. How to practically and effectively address these dilemmas is the ultimate challenge of citizenship in a constitutional democracy and the determiner of the political system's destiny.

Essential Civic Skills. Core knowledge must be applied effectively to civic life if it would serve the needs of citizens and their *civitas*. Thus, a central facet of civic education for constitutional democracy is development of intellectual skills and participatory skills, which enable citizens to think and act in behalf of their individual rights and their common good. Intellectual skills empower citizens to identify, describe, and explain information and ideas pertinent to public issues and to make and defend decisions on these issues. Participatory skills empower citizens to influence public policy decisions and to hold accountable their representatives in government.

The development of civic skills requires intellectually active learning by students inside and outside the classroom. Students are continually challenged to use information and ideas, individually and collectively, to analyze case studies, respond to public issues, and resolve political problems.

Essential Civic Virtues. A third generic category of democratic civic education pertains to virtues. These are traits of character necessary to preservation and improvement of a constitutional democracy. If citizens would enjoy the privileges and rights of their polity, they must take responsibility for them, which requires a certain measure of civic virtue.

Civic virtues such as self-discipline, civility, compassion, tolerance, and respect for the worth and dignity of all individuals are indispensable to the proper functioning of civil society and constitutional government. These characteristics must be nurtured through various social agencies, including the school, in a healthy constitutional democracy.

The Democratic Teacher. Three generic components of democratic civic education that transcend political boundaries and cultures are (1) core concepts that denote essential knowledge, (2) intellectual and participatory skills that enable practical application of civic knowledge, and (3) virtues that dispose

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citizens to act for the good of their community. The effective democratic teacher develops lessons and learning activities for students that emphasize and intertwine the three generic components of international civic education in a classroom environment compatible with the theory and practices of constitutional democracy and liberty.

The democratic teacher, for example, emphasizes interactive learning tasks in which students are challenged to take responsibility for their achievement of educational objectives. The democratic teacher encourages and protects free and open expression of ideas in an atmosphere of academic freedom. Further, the democratic teacher establishes and applies rules fairly, according to principles of equal protection and due process for each individual. There is recognition that true liberty is inextricably connected with just rules, and that the equal right to freedom of individuals depends upon an equitable rule of law for all members of the community. Finally, the democratic teacher creates a classroom environment in which there is respect for the worth and dignity of each person.

Democratic teachers take responsibility for developing challenging and interesting lessons for students. Thus, they continue to educate themselves through a life-long program of reading, thinking, reflecting and planning to enhance their capacities for the education of citizens. They continue to seek, obtain, and use resources for civic education, such as those listed in this ERIC Digest.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of p;resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Services (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided or requested through Interlibrary Loan.

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